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ABSTRACT

Civic education "means explicit and continuing study of the basic concepts and values underlying our democratic political community and constitutional order" (Butts 1988, 184). It draws its content chiefly from four disciplines: political science, jurisprudence, history, and economics. Political science and jurisprudence provide an understanding of ideas, institutions, and procedures about law and government that protect individual rights and promote a government based on law, majority rule with minority rights, and the public good. The study of history gives us knowledge of our country's past, who we are as a people, and our successes and failures in realizing our country's political and legal ideals. And economics offers knowledge about how to use scarce resources to satisfy human needs and wants within a constitutional government based on the values of democracy and individual rights. However, language education, too, makes an important contribution to civic education. (Author)

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by

Sandra Stotsky

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The Connections Between Language Education and Civic Education

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Civic education "means explicit and continuing study of the basic concepts and values underlying our democratic political community and constitutional order" (Butts 1988, 184). It draws its content chiefly from four disciplines: political science, jurisprudence, history, and economics. Political science and jurisprudence provide an understanding of ideas, institutions, and procedures about law and government that protect individual rights and promote a government based on law, majority rule with minority rights, and the public good. The study of history gives us knowledge of our country's past, who we are as a people, and our successes and failures in realizing our country's political and legal ideals. And economics offers knowledge about how to use scarce resources to satisfy human needs and wants within a constitutional government based on the values of democracy and individual rights. However, language education, too, makes an important contribution to civic education.

How Can Literary Study Contribute to the Formation of Civic Identity and Character? Literary study can contribute to the formation of civic identity and civic character in several distinct ways (Stotsky 1991a).

Significant National Literature. First, it can expose students to historically significant works that illuminate our nation's cultural history and values (Stotsky 1989). Such works as Benjamin Franklin's autobiography, Ralph Waldo Emerson's essays, or Henry Thoreau's *On Civil Disobedience* and *Walden Pond* are among those literary works that contribute to an understanding of our political and social values and to our civic identity. Of course, students need to read not only what we can be proud of as Americans, but also what we have failed to do well and what we need to improve upon. A well-conceived literature program provides a balanced view of our country's social and political experiences. For example, teachers could use John Hershey's *A Bell for Adano* in tandem with Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*. Or teachers might use James Comer's *Maggie's American Dream*, a story about a strong-minded black mother whose four children all became successful professionals despite racial discrimination, to balance Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*, a bleak story about mainly single mothers and their children in an urban housing project.

Characters as Intellectual and Moral Models. Literary study can also expose students to strong characters with clear moral and intellectual values. Students who identify with those characters may then internalize their values. Such works as *Antigone, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, To Kill a Mockingbird, A Man for all Seasons, Jean Christophe*, and *The Fountainhead* feature protagonists with strong intellectual or moral principles who choose to live by the dictates of their conscience, whether or not they suffer social disapproval, isolation, or even death. Because principled thinking, the expression of individual conscience, and the assumption of personal responsibility for one's actions are central values in the history of Western civilization and in a liberal constitutional democracy, literature programs can make a significant contribution to civic education by offering students such works to read (Jones 1966). A good literature program should also expose young students to characters who exhibit such traits as courage, hope, optimism, ambition, individual initiative, love of country, love of family, the ability to laugh at themselves, a concern for the environment, and outrage at social injustice.

Literature about Other Peoples. Finally, literature programs can expose students to works about people who live in countries or societies that differ markedly from their own. Such works can help students understand why human beings, despite often vast cultural differences, value both personal freedom and social justice, and want liberal constitutional democracies for their own countries. Chinua Achebe's *When Things Fall Apart*, Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*, and Ignazio Silone's *Fontamara* and *Bread and Wine* are among those works that can broaden students' knowledge of diverse ways of living and the different problems people in other societies have encountered at the same time that they learn how similar most people are in their basic human needs and wants.

How Can Writing Instruction Develop Intellectual and Moral Autonomy? Writing instruction can help develop the intellectual and moral autonomy desired in a democratic citizenry in several ways.

Independent Thinking Through the Research Process. Teachers who assign research projects help their students develop some of the most important skills citizens need: how to seek answers to their own questions; how to locate, on their own, sources of needed information; how to evaluate their relevance and quality; and how to organize information and ideas for their own purposes (Stotsky 1991b). Regular experience with the research process is probably the best means for developing the intellectual habits that are basic to informed and responsible public discourse: open-ended inquiry, the use of both primary and secondary sources, independent reading, and critical thinking.

Ethical Aspects of Academic Writing. Writing instruction can also help students develop a conscious appreciation and use of the ethics of academic writing, which should underlie public and academic discourse (Stotsky 1991c). For example, students should learn as part of their academic writing that

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responsible writers do not quote other writer's ideas out of context; seek information on all points of view about a question; do not assume their readers will agree with their point of view without being given reasonable evidence; and present the results of their inquiry in a way that does not insult many possible readers.

Desirable Qualities in Communications to Public Officials or Other Citizens. Finally, writing teachers can help students learn about the major purposes for which citizens write — whether to public officials or to other citizens (Stotsky 1991d). Citizens may write to thank a public official for a good law she may have helped to pass, or by expressing sympathy to her for losing a re-election campaign. Citizens also frequently write to request information or help from their public officials. In addition, some citizens regularly gather and offer the public useful information or services, as does the League of Women Voters. Finally, citizens may write whenever they wish to other citizens or their public officials to criticize a public service and/or to advocate a position on a public issue, political party, or public figure.

If teachers are careful to observe certain professional guidelines (spelled out in Stotsky 1992), they can design a variety of classroom-based activities that give their students opportunities to participate as writers in local or national affairs (see Stotsky 1987 and 1990 for descriptions of participatory writing activities that teachers have carried out in elementary and secondary schools across the country). Indeed, teachers can help all students learn how to write succinctly, clearly, and courteously to public officials or other citizens, and with appropriate information to support their purpose for writing.

How Can Teachers Help Enhance the Quality of Public Discourse? Students should learn to see reading and writing as vital support for the most direct way that citizens can express themselves and participate in public life — as public speakers. Public speaking was the primary medium for participation in public affairs at the birth of democracy in ancient Athens, and even today public dialogue or argument is for most citizens the chief means for participating in public life. But too often public dialogue is little more than polarized or polarizing debate, with neither side genuinely listening to and learning from the other, as Ede (1991) found in an analysis of a local controversy. Language teachers can help enhance the quality of public dialogue by teaching their students how to engage in class discussions that require them to paraphrase as well as to respond to the points made by others (Katula 1991). They can especially advance the cause of improving civic discourse in this country if they teach their students certain strategies for public debate that derive from classical rhetoric: to avoid logical fallacies in developing their arguments; to construct arguments that respect the truth and demonstrate an understanding of, if not sympathy with, alternative positions; and to seek common ground in debates on controversial issues (Ede 1991; Katula 1991). Perhaps a basic speaking skill to develop in all students is their ability to generate their own questions about a topic they are studying (Stotsky 1987). All students must become active learners who know how to pursue their own curiosity and who can engage in independent critical thinking.

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